Roman Gladiator Types

Different gladiators specialized in different weapons and tactics. The following illustrates these various styles and equipment. Of these,Thracians, Mirmillones, Retiarii, and Secutores were four of the most common.

Andabatae: (1st cent. BC) Clad in chainmail like eastern cavalry (cataphracti), wore visored helmets without eye holes. They charged blindly at one another on horseback as an ancient precursor to the medieval joust.

Bestiarii: (beast fighters) originally armed with a spear or knife, these gladiators were condemned to fight beasts with a high probability of death. In later times, the Bestiarii were highly trained, specializing in various types of exotic, imported beasts.

Dimachaeri: Used two-swords, one in each hand.

Equites: Fought on horseback with a spear and gladius, dressed in a full tunic, with a manica (arm-guard). Generally, the Eques only fought gladiators of his own type.

Essedari: Celtic style charioteers, likely first brought to Rome from Britain by Caesar.

Hoplomachi (heavily armed) or Samnite: Fully armored, and based on Greek hoplites. They wore a helmet with a stylized griffin on the crest, woollen quilted leg wrappings, and shin-guards. They carried a spear in the Hoplite style with a small round shield. They were paired against Mirmillones or Thraces.

Laquerii: Laqueatores used a rope and noose.

Mirmillones (or murmillones): Wore a helmet with a stylized fish on the crest (the mormylos or sea fish), as well as an arm guard (manica). They carried a gladius and an oblong shield in the Gallic style. They were paired with Hoplomachi or Thraces.

Provocatores(challengers): Paired against the Samnites but their armament is unknown and may have been variable depending on the games.

Retiarii: Carried a trident, a dagger, and a net, a larger manica extending to the shoulder and left side of the chest. They commonly fought secutores or mirmillones. Occasionally a metal shoulder shield, or galerus, was added to protect the neck and lower face.

Saggitarii: Mounted bowman armed with reflex bows capable of propelling an arrow a great distance.

Samnites: see Hoplomachi.

Secutores: Had the same armour as a murmillo, including oblong shield and a gladius. They were the usual opponents of retiarii.

Scissores (carvers): Little is known about this ominous sounding gladiator.

Thraces: The Thracian was equipped with a broad-rimmed helmet that enclosed the entire head, a small round or square-shaped shield, and two thigh-length greaves. His weapon was the Thracian curved sword, or the sica. They commonly fought mirmillones or hoplomachi.

Velites: Fought on foot, each holding a spear with attached thong in strap for throwing. Named for the early Republican army units of the same name.

Venatores: Specialized in wild animal hunts. Technically not gladiators but still a part of the games.

One more type deserving mention is the Praegenarii who were used as an ancient opening act to get the crowd in the mood. They used a rudis (wooden sword) and wore wrappings around body. As they fought, they were accompanied by music (cymbals, trumpets, and hydraulis water organ).

Can you properly identify Gladiators and the gear they used? Test your skills and hold the lives of your Gladiators in your hands in this interactive game at BBC